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The Director of Central Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council
Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth
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SUBJECT: Soviet Interest in the Nicaraguan Debate

The attached paper seeks to state briefly what the Soviets have at stake in the on-going US controversy over Nicaragua. In essence: Their long-term aim is to establish Marxist-Leninist clients in Central America. Their immediate aim is to discredit and demoralize an administration they regard as a major strategic threat to their power ambitions. This will lead them to reinforce the challenge we face locally in Central America, e.g., with arms, while trying to keep a low-enough profile to avoid stimulating new US action and public consensus behind it. There are two messages here that rebut some of the criticisms leveled at US policy:

- a. Moscow, like the Administration, sees Central America as an important theater in the long-term US-Soviet competition.
- b. Although Soviet interests in Central America are less vital in some sense than in regions closer to home, it has an extremely vital interest in how the credibility and resolve of US foreign policy come through this controversy. It has a tricky problem of not underplaying or overplaying its hand in a region of military weakness. But the stakes it plays for are ~~very~~ important.


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THE SOVIET STANCE ON NICARAGUA

1. The current controversy in the US over the mining in Nicaragua and US policy in Central America generally presents the USSR with a sharpening of the strategic opportunity as well as the challenge that its involvement in Central American has represented for some years.

2. In the longer run, Moscow would like to see the emergence of a Marxist-Leninist regime firmly in charge in Nicaragua, effectively allied with Cuba and the USSR, effectively supporting leftist revolution in El Salvador and beyond, but having an outward appearance just "mellow" enough to garner liberal international support. It is worth noting in this connection that Soviet Third World strategy has, since the early 1970s, stressed the great importance of creating disciplined Marxist-Leninist party-police regimes wherever possible to drive the revolution and make it irreversible. After over two decades of Third World involvement, Moscow has concluded that "liberal-nationalist reformers" are not trustworthy enough to serve Soviet aims or ruthless enough to protect their own power.

3. In the short to mid-term, however, the great physical remove of Central America from the bases of Soviet military power, the corresponding geographic advantages for US military power projection, the potential vulnerability of Cuba to the effects of regional conflict escalation, and the international politics surrounding US involvement there -- all these factors create another, more delicate set of tactical calculations for the Soviets. Their overriding immediate goal is to see US foreign policy discredited and US government morale severely undermined by developments in Central America. To achieve this the Soviets must encourage the Sandinistas in challenging the US, but the challenge and the image of Soviet involvement must not become so pronounced that the US is stimulated to take decisive action, either in further support of the Contras or in direct intervention.

4. Current Soviet behavior appears to reflect these calculations. They have vigorously denounced US actions in public. They have expressed "solidarity" with Nicaragua. But they have been very cautious not to express a commitment to act to counter US escalation. And their actions with respect to military assistance have been calculated to give the appearance of restraint. Thus, they handled the recent visit of Nicaragua's defense minister to Moscow in a very low key fashion. He later stated that the Soviets had "reaffirmed their political, moral and material solidarity, and the Soviets spoke even more vaguely. They have made no public offer to help in mine clearing, and private references to such action that we have heard about have been somewhat enigmatic ("of course we'll help if asked").

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5. The Soviets appear conscious of the fact -- or at least the possibility -- that the revival or demise of the "Vietnam syndrome" in American politics is at stake in the current controversy over Central America. Their own actions could help stimulate US public support for decisive action, which if successful could spell the end of the "Vietnam syndrome", i.e., the political constraints which prevent the use and sap the credibility of US military power in messy Third World situations. But a substantial degree of support and encouragement to the Sandinistas, as well as other clients, is required to sustain the pressures on the US which exacerbate this syndrome and help it to undermine US policy generally, not just in Central America.

6. These calculations make it likely that the Soviets will cautiously increase their military aid to Nicaragua in the near future, and also act to spur rebel activities in El Salvador. The amount of new arms aid may be considerable. But the political management of the process will be aimed at avoiding a risky degree of commitment. This balancing act on the Soviet part may have to be sustained for a number of years. Should the present administration in Washington be reelected, the Soviets would fear that its restored mandate would raise the likelihood of decisive US action next year. In the extreme, they may be willing to see their revolutionary partners in Central America defeated at US hands if this leads to a crippling of US political ability to act elsewhere, e.g., in the Middle East. Their fear, however, is that the successful exercise of US power in Central America will encourage US willingness to use it where Soviet equities are much more substantial.

7. It has been argued that the convenience of Central America for Soviet policy is that it permits Moscow to make unavoidable trouble for the US, with the prospect of real gains but very little risk of loss to the Soviets. By comparison with the Middle East, for example, this characterization has merit. On the other hand, by now the Soviets do have a degree of commitment in Central America, which connects with a very large and vulnerable commitment in Cuba. Moreover, after their failure to stop INF deployments in Europe and their inability to do very much with opportunities in the Middle East lately, Central America is at the moment the best regional security setting in which they have hope of giving additional political trouble to the present US administration. They cannot afford to take many risks to underwrite that hope, however. And if the Administration comes through the current political test with an ability to act effectively against the revolutionaries in Nicaragua and elsewhere who would take the region in a Marxist-Leninist direction, then the Soviets could face an even more formidable US adversary during the rest of the decade. In this sense, the Soviets have a lot to gain and a lot to lose in Central America just now.

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